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ABSTRACT

For the most part, research into the reading activities of elderly readers has focused on three areas--amount of time spent reading, reading preferences, and psychological benefits of reading--and has yielded inconsistent results. The data from reading time research both supports and refutes the claim that reading is less prevalent among older than among younger people, although the implicit general conclusion of this research appears to be that reading is a popular leisure activity for the elderly. Reading preference research suggests that the reading preferences of older readers are totally individualistic. Finally, while researchers have made claims for the psychological benefits of reading for the elderly, such claims do not appear to be supported by empirical research. Further research should focus on defining more clearly the relationship between reading and psychological benefits. Perhaps researchers could gain more critical insights into the benefits of reading for the elderly by investigating the concept of value of reading, based on the interaction between time spent reading and the importance and enjoyment of reading for the individual. The concept of value of reading has implications for the development of reading programs based on individual differences and for investigations of the social and psychological processes that influence the elderly reader. (GT)

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Although most educators would implicitly agree that the development of skills and interests in lifelong reading is one of the prime goals of education, for the most part, educational research tends to focus on the needs, interests and abilities of beginning and developing readers. There have been relatively few investigations of the reading habits of young adult readers and even fewer reports on the variables that influence the interests, attitudes or priorities of older adult readers.

The investigation of reading activities of older adults would seem especially relevant now in view of the rapidly increasing proportion of individuals in the population who are reaching retirement age. As Atchley (1971) suggests that continuity of activities enjoyed prior to retirement can contribute to adjustment

after retirement, it may be that reading contributes to retirement adjustment for some individuals. As it may be easier to continue reading into old age, than other more physically demanding activities, it would seem appropriate to investigate the reading behaviours of older individuals to determine whether reading contributes to adjustment to retirement and old age.

I. Review of the Literature

For the most part, research which has investigated the reading activities of older readers has focused on three areas:

(1) amount of time spent reading (reading time research)

(2) preference of materials selected for reading (reading preference research)

(3) psychological benefits of reading.

Typically, researchers have obtained data on older readers from national surveys of adult populations or from studies of elderly library users. In their review of the reading process and the elderly, Robinson and Haase (1979) suggest that both these sources of data are limited. They note that national surveys frequently treat information on older readers as "incidental to research findings on other age groupings" (1979, p. 224). That is, while age cohort differences in reading activities for individuals under sixty are usually reported, national surveys frequently do not differentiate findings for those over 60. Individuals over 60 tend to be regarded as a homogeneous group. Robinson and Haase (1979)

criticize library usage studies for their tendency to focus on select and often, institutionalized samples. For example, Buswell (1971) sampled only male institutionalized veterans; Lovelace (1979), only nursing home patients; Wolf (1975), only retirement home residents. As, at most, only 15% of the population over 65 is institutionalized, generalizing results of investigations of reading activities of institutionalized elderly, to all older readers, is open to question. As well, generalizing results of investigations of library users to all readers is questionable.

Apart from these general criticisms of reading research on the elderly, there are inconsistencies in the research in the three main areas of investigation of older readers. Specific examination of these inconsistencies follows.

Reading Time Research

While some reading time studies have focused on the elderly as a target population (Beyer and Woods, 1963, cited in Riley and Foner, 1968; Wolf, 1975), most research has attempted to measure time spent reading by the adult population in general. The data on older readers from this research both supports and refutes the claim that reading is less prevalent among older individuals than among young people. Sharon (1974), in a national survey of the reading interests and habits of 5067 adults aged 16+, found that "younger readers tend to read more than older readers, while the very old spent the least amount of time reading" (1974, p. 61). As Sharon provided no definition

of the "very old", it is difficult to determine to whom he referred by this group. As well, the higher incidence of reading in Sharon's younger age groups could be due in part to the fact that it included many high school and college students for whom reading was a required activity. McElroy (1968), in her survey of 1468 adults aged 21+, supported Sharon's findings that the proportion of readers declined with age. However, McElroy sampled only book reading. As Atkin (1976) has indicated that age patterns of newspaper and magazine reading appear to be different from those for book reading, perhaps McElroy (1968) would have found different reading patterns across the ages if she had sampled other reading materials.

In contrast to Sharon's and McElroy's findings that younger people read more than older people, Pheiffer and Davis (1971) and Riley and Foner (1968) found that old people read more than younger individuals. In their survey of the leisure time activities of 502 adults aged 46-71, Pheiffer and Davis found that "time spent reading was significantly greater in the older age groups" (1971, p. 190). Unfortunately, they do not specify these groups. Riley and Foner (1968), in a survey of their leisure activities of 5000 non-institutionalized adults, concluded that individuals over 60 spent more time reading books and magazines than individuals 30-60. Unfortunately, they provide no specific information on reading time for these individuals over age 60. This information would have been useful for examining how time spent reading changed for older readers.

The confounding results of the reading time research could be due

in part to variations in reading materials sampled. McElroy (1968) sampled just book reading; Pheiffer and Davis (1971) and Riley and Foner (1968) just books and magazines; Sharon (1974), all reading material. As well, variability could be due to the fact that while some studies investigated just leisure time reading (Pheiffer and Davis, 1971; Riley and Foner, 1968), others, (Sharon, 1974), included both leisure and work related reading. The differences across age groups between reading as a required, and reading as a preferred, activity is an area for further research. As well, research which attempts to investigate how reading time changes as one ages would seem appropriate.

Reading Preference Research

Despite the confounding results of reading time research, the implicit general conclusion of this research appears to be that based on its frequency of occurrence, reading is a popular leisure activity for the elderly.

Reading preference research has attempted to support this implicit conclusion by investigating the preferences of materials the elderly read. Blakely (1970), in her survey of elderly Milwaukee library users, found they preferred mysteries, westerns, and gothic novels. Lovelace (1979) found nursing home patients preferred nostalgic stories which facilitated reminiscing. Moshey (1972), surveying the reading interests of retired professionals, found they preferred biographies, travel books, and fiction. Wolf (1975) found retirement home residents

preferred books on religion, biography and adventure.

In their review of research investigating the reading interests and preferences of older readers, Harvey and Dutton (1979) caution against overgeneralizing results of these studies. "In light of the information available, it appears that the interests vary as widely as the readers themselves" (1979, p. 212). Wilson (1979) supports this viewpoint with her conclusion that the reading preferences of older readers are totally individualistic. Acknowledging this individualistic nature of reading interests, recent research on older readers has attempted to determine how reading benefits the older individual.

Psychological Benefits Research

Recent research (Lovelace, 1979; Wilson, 1979; Wolf, 1975) has tended to make rather elaborate claims for the psychological benefits of reading for the elderly. While the elderly may experience psychological benefits related to reading, such claims in recent research do not appear to be supported by empirical evidence. Lovelace (1979), investigating the effect of a weekly reading group on fifteen nursing home patients, concluded that reading helped enhance the lives of these patients. However, she included no definition or measurement of enhancement. While there may have been changes in this sample during the reading sessions and, while these changes may have been influenced by reading, there appears to be no empirical support for the enhancement claim. One could also question the

representativeness of these patients of institutionalized elderly.

Wilson (1979) reporting on a program of weekly reading sessions with a group of six to twelve women readers in a retirement centre, supported Lovelace's finding that reading contributes to enhancement. Again, no evidence is presented to show how enhancement was measured.

It is difficult to determine the real influence of reading for participants in these two studies. As both researchers emphasize that participants regarded the reading groups as social gatherings, it may have been that the social, rather than the reading, aspect enhanced the lives of the participants. If it was the social interaction of the group situation which helped participants feel better, then, any social activity which facilitates this interaction would seem relevant for enhancement. One should be careful not to ascribe to reading, benefits which actually accrue from other sources. To their credit, Lovelace and Wilson caution against regarding reading as a panacea for the problems of aging. However, both appear to overstress the psychological benefits of reading without presenting adequate empirical support to justify these claims.

Wolf (1979) attempted to specify empirically the benefits of reading in his investigation of the leisure time reading involvement of retirement home residents. Investigating the therapeutic value of reading, which he defined as any behaviour which helped individuals feel better about themselves, relieve psychological tensions, or solve problems, he concluded that "reading provides the elderly with

a coping mechanism pertinent to the problems of aging" (1977, p. 17). However, Wolf did not explain how psychological tension or feelings about self were measured. Nor did he request respondents to specify how reading helped them "therapeutically". Respondents may have ascribed therapeutic value to reading which, in reality, was not due to reading . As with Lovelace's and Wilson's research, Wolf's study provides no clear empirical evidence for the psychological benefits of reading.

It would appear that rather than continue to accept uncritically that reading is good for the elderly, that it helps them cope or adjust, further research is needed which attempts to define more clearly the relationship between reading and psychological benefits. Rather than continue to document reading time, or reading preferences, both of which could be influenced by a variety of economic, physical, and physiological factors, it would seem more useful to attempt to determine how the elderly regard reading and how relevant it is to them.

II. Future Perspectives

Reading time and reading preferences research has presented valuable information on the general reading habits of the elderly. However, this research has provided minimal data on why the elderly read or the relevance of reading to them. Chester (1975) in his review of gerontological research in reading observed that "... we do not ... have adequate research describing the importance of

reading in the life of older adults (if it is important at all)" (1975, p. 378). While there has been considerable recent research in this area, the situation does not appear to have changed significantly since Chester's comment.

Is reading important to the elderly? In a more conceptual sense, do the elderly value reading as an activity and do they value the stimulation it affords them? There seems to be an implicit assumption that because reading is often cited as a leisure activity, it is important or valuable to the elderly. This assumption may not be valid. There are many examples of people spending time at an activity that they find unimportant. Students often spend considerable time reading material that they consider unimportant or irrelevant. Similarly, the elderly may spend a great deal of time reading without considering that the reading per se is important to them. They may be reading to pass the time, to alleviate boredom, to give an image that they are engaged in some activity, because they think it is good for them, or because they feel that they will receive more attention from researchers and practitioners if they read. As such, when one is investigating aspects of reading among the elderly, consideration should not only be given to the amount of time spend reading, but also to the importance of reading to the individual.

In addition to time spent reading and the importance of reading, the enjoyment of reading to the individual should be considered in reading research with the elderly. Again, there is an assumption that if one reads often and if one finds it important to do so, it

is axiomatic that this reading is enjoyable to the individual. However this assumption may also be wrong. For example, students often spend much time reading and find it important for various reasons, but they do not necessarily enjoy all the reading they do, and, therefore, are not committed to it. This difference between commitment and activity, which has been cited in leisure research with the elderly (Lowenthal, 1977), may also apply to some elderly readers who may read only under certain circumstances which may not be directly related to the enjoyment of reading.

Therefore, perhaps researchers could gain more critical insights into the benefits of reading for the elderly by investigating the concept of Value of reading for the individual, rather than simply the activity of reading. This concept can be defined as the interaction between time spent reading, the importance of that reading and the enjoyment of that reading to the individual. These three variables are seen to contribute to the concept of Value based on the assumption that if one values an activity, one will spend time at it. To the extent that any of these variables is absent or diminished, the Value of reading will be lessened for the individual.

There are several research and practical implications related to the concept of Value of reading. By considering Value researchers may be able to differentiate between the elderly who read because they have nothing else to do or because of social reasons, and those who have a strong commitment to reading. The practical implications

of this differentiation would be to develop different reading programs based on individual differences in Value of reading. This concept would also contribute to developing knowledge and skills related to different psychological benefits for elderly readers who vary with respect to their Value of reading. Value may also be a useful concept in the investigation of elderly people who have general high or low morale. Does Value of reading contribute to morale? What influence do physical decrements which may restrict reading have on Value of reading and morale?

The concept of Value of reading appears to offer scope for future research and practice in the developing area of reading and the elderly. By focusing on an individual's assessment of his committment to and involvement with reading, Value would appear to offer differential insights into the benefits of reading for the elderly. As data have been gathered and reported on the activities, habits, and interests of the elderly reader, it is an appropriate time to consider the next phase of reading research with the elderly. The concept of Value of reading is offered as a conceptual tool to develop further information and insight into the social psychological processes that influence the elderly reader.

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